DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 108 EA 009 530

AUTHOR Brodinsky, Ben
TITLE How a School Board Operates. Fastback 88.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa, Bloomington, Ind.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 39p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, Eighth and Union, Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana 47401 ($0.75 nonmembers, $0.60 members, quantity discounts; orders under $5 must be prepaid, otherwise $1 will be charge for handling)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board Administrator Relationship; *Board of Education Role; Boards of Education; Court Litigation; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Legislation; Meetings; *Policy Formation; Public Relations; *School Community Relationship; School Superintendents; State School District Relationship

ABSTRACT

The author provides an overview of the responsibilities of a school board member. Beginning with a view of the origins and constraints of the board's authority--federal and state law and, increasingly, court decisions--the author examines the board member's responsibilities in the areas of directing the educational system, making decisions that further educational goals, selling the public to education and the schools to the public, developing policy, and conducting meetings of several sorts. (IRT)

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BEN BRODINSKY

Ben Brodinsky has come a long way since he wrote news releases for the U.S. Office of Education for a salary of $1 a year 40 years ago. First he had to take a 15% pay cut when President Hoover reduced all federal salaries, but the New Deal came and raised Brodinsky's salary by 4,000%.

Brodinsky uses Old Saybrook, Connecticut, as a base for his editorial and consulting services. In such capacities he works with the Educational Press Association, the National Association of School Boards, the National School Public Relations Association, and the Association of American Publishers. He is currently vice-president of the Connecticut State Poetry Association.

In the past 43 years, Brodinsky has written some 2,000 newsletters (*Education Summary, Educator's Dispatch, Teacher's Letter, EdPress Newsletter*); has published 500 articles; and has edited up to 32 news publications a month for Croft Educational Services (1945-1970).

Among Brodinsky's special qualifications for writing this fastback is service, from 1963 to 1973, on the board of education of Old Saybrook schools. During the last four years of this period he was vice-chairperson of the board.

Series Editor, Donald W. Robinson

How A School Board Operates

By Ben Brodinsky

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-57301
ISBN 0-87367-088-4
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Bloomington, Indiana

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Overview

Every weekday, in every community across the nation, men and women leave the supper table and take off for a room or hall prepared for them by their school district officials. They arrive in groups of five, seven, nine—the number varies. As they take their places around a conference table, they are transformed legally into potentially the most important public group in the community. It is a daily miracle, setting in motion the process that controls (to a certain degree) America's vast public school system.

These groups are the nation's boards of education, getting down for an evening's work that may go past midnight. As they work through their agendas, what they accomplish may at times seem harmless, at times mischievous, and on rare occasions even harmful to the children of the community. But in most instances, and in most places, the work of the boards of education promotes and enhances the schooling of America's children and youth.

There are between 15,000 and 16,000 school districts in the country. Making up the boards of education that serve them are nearly 100,000 men and women. There was a time when the average board member was described as middle-aged, male, Caucasian, Republican, of slightly above average income. In cities and towns the board member was likely to be a banker, lawyer, real estate operator, or retired accountant; in rural communities, a prosperous farmer or storekeeper. If there is homogeneity among board members today, it may reside in the fact that they are now more definitely "middle Americans," representing neither an elite nor the underclasses. Yet women, Democrats, blacks, the poor, and all major ethnic groups are represented to some degree on America's school boards. The male

Caucasian conservative or middle-of-the-roader still dominates many school boards, but he is being challenged almost everywhere by America's multicultural populations and rapidly changing mores. And we know that board members are slightly younger than was the case a generation ago.

It is to these people that America today entrusts the business of running its public elementary and secondary schools, with their 45,000,000 students and 2,500,000 teachers and staff members.

The economic power of the boards is reflected in their disbursement of some 68 billion dollars a year of local, state, and federal funds. Their educational and cultural influence is less definite and is under debate. America's school boards have been denounced, ridiculed, maligned, and bypassed as useless. Some teachers regard their board as an enemy. Some administrators see boards as meddlers in a profession too complex even for the expert. Some academicians say that the board of education, which may have been useful in a simpler American society, has now outlived its usefulness. Finally, it is charged that the board is all too often politics-minded, swaying and bending to partisan demands, carrying out the wishes of factions, sometimes at the expense of children and their education.

The alternative view is sharply different. Here, it is said, is a body of volunteers giving their time, practical experience, and lay wisdom to education, a matter too important to be left to the educators. Through the board of education, it is said, the parent and the taxpayer have some control over school policy. The board also balances the zeal of the specialist or advocate of special causes with the needs of the student and the family, and provides a link with the community often denied to the educator.

Certainly, the board of education is uniquely American. No Serb, no Arab, no Latin American, and no member of the great Oriental societies—and that takes in nearly all the globe—has the privilege of serving on a body with the functions and responsibilities of an American school board.

Consider its attributes: a body of laypersons, ever-changing in its make-up, its individuals seldom becoming entrenched; a creature of the state, yet responsible to the local voters; weak in many respects, yet endowed with power to legislate, to administer its acts, and function as a semijudicial agency.

It is a policy formulator and planner. In many communities the board is a fiscally independent agency for levying taxes and issuing bonds. It drafts budgets, enters into contracts, hires and fires its chief executive officer, the superintendent, and can approve or disapprove the employment of all staff. It builds new buildings and remodels old ones. It owns real estate and capital investments which, even in the smaller community, may be worth millions. It is frequently a town's largest employer and paymaster for artists and musicians, psychologists and nurses, cooks, janitors, and bus drivers. It operates transportation systems and food services, manages warehouses for textbooks and supplies, controls computer and data processing services, and carries on major purchasing, insurance, printing, and mailing activities.

The board is also expected to be educational philosopher, curriculum developer, textbook selector, communicator and interpreter of education, evaluator of school progress—in short, mentor for each generation of children and youth.

Under such a load of responsibilities, America's school boards perform sometimes effectively, sometimes indifferently. Some are giants, others are pygmies in achievement. Some take their real tasks to be guardians of the public purse and so hold back expenditures for schools; others see their first goal as developing intelligent and capable citizens and muster all the resources they can—money, talent, staff, material—for this purpose.

Not understanding their own responsibility, some boards act as a rubber stamp for the educator or the vested interest in town, or as shock absorber of public complaints against the schools without doing too much about them. They may also act as fire-fighters rushing from one school/community crisis to another, without concern about causes and cures.

Clyde McKee, professor at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, classifies board members as follows:

> First, there are the ratifiers. They see their function as legitimatizing the recommendations of the educational administrators, whom they see as policy initiators.
>
> Next are the negotiators, who see their role as mediating conflict between individuals and groups who are battling for different points of view within the educational arena.
>
> Third are the educational advocates. They have strong ties to particular groups or interests or they select pet projects upon which to

concentrate—the school band, vocational education, reading, or football.

Then there are the judges. They have particular interests in judging this teacher or that teacher—or all teachers.

We come now to the administrators, so-called. Their eyes light up whenever the superintendent submits a contract that has gone out to bid or when he recommends buying new equipment.

Related to the administrators are the budget analysts, who are really frustrated financial wizards. They like at least five sharpened pencils to accompany the first draft of the school budget.

Nearly every board has its gossipers, who want the names of pregnant teachers and students and to know who is divorcing whom.

Finally, there are the status seekers who preen before the press at board meetings, making "newsworthy" statements or who call the state commissioner of education by his first name and report this at the next board meeting.

The true functions of the member and his* board are of loftier character, as we see in detail in the succeeding pages. And board members are making genuine efforts to understand these functions better and to perform more effectively. Regional and state associations of school boards offer a constant round of workshops, institutes, and conferences on boardmanship. The annual convention of the National School Boards Association, called a four-day university of boardmanship, attracts from 20,000 to 25,000 board members (and their spouses) and offers lectures, seminars, round-table discussions, clinics, and miniworkshops on hundreds of board-related topics. The NSBA and most state school board associations publish monthly journals as well as newsletters, manuals, guidebooks, and even learned documents on boardmanship.

Board members, the evidence shows, make real efforts to be better prepared to operate America's schools.

*For clarity and economy, we use the masculine form of pronouns throughout this publication when no specific gender is implied. While we recognize the trend away from this practice, we see no graceful alternative. We hope the reader will impute no sexist motives; certainly none are intended. —*The Editors*

Power and Authority

The parent of a first-grader may think all educational power is vested in Room 10 and Teacher Jones, and many a citizen reckons that educational authority resides in the local board of education or even a single member. It is difficult for many individuals—even board members—to grasp the concept that the power to control and direct education lies not in the district or with local taxpayers. To the extent that there is a single locus of educational authority for a community (and it is a locus of shrinking dimensions), it is not in Middletown, Tecumseh, or Petaluma, but in Hartford, Lansing, and Sacramento. The state is education, education is the state—for legal purposes, at least. It's been so since the birth of our country.

The Constitution of the United States says nothing about education, so the Tenth Amendment, supposedly, takes care of it. Under that amendment education is reserved to the states and the people, because it was not one of the functions the Founding Fathers saw fit to assign to the national government.

Not that the federal government was cool to public education. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and George Washington heated up the issue so it would get the attention of the Continental Congress. The Northwest Ordinance, turning over millions of acres of national land for schools, was the first of several early commitments to public education.

Many state constitutions echoed the ordinance language as they set the foundations for their public schools, declaring that since knowledge and morality are necessary to the happiness of mankind, "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Today, all state constitutions instruct their state legislatures to maintain and support systems of free and compulsory public

elementary and secondary schools and to enact the laws needed for executing this mandate.

Each state's school code, augmented by attorney general decisions and opinions, is the visible repository of educational power and authority.

The state delegates substantial portions of its authority to the local school board, a legalism true for every state and community. This should give the board extensive and all but supreme power over its local educational programs. It doesn't work that way.

Superboards control American education. Some are tangible, identifiable, with vast power to grip school board operations. Among them are the Congress and its laws; the federal executive and its guidelines, rules, regulations, and billions of dollars to control programs; and the judiciary, with its decisions from the U.S. Supreme Court down through the federal court structure. Other superboards are less corporal, but still influential and pervasive, such as the "findings of research," the influence of curriculum and test makers, parent power, and teacher power.

At first federal laws directing school policy began to roll out of Washington slowly and ponderously. The Smith-Hughes vocational acts (1917) supported but also controlled training in agriculture, home economics, and trades and industry. The National Defense Education Act (1958) laid down high priorities for teaching science and math. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) placed the poor child on top of every school board's agenda of concern.

At the same time, the ESEA also pried loose many a school bill that had been buried in Congress for years. The rush of measures toward enactment gathered momentum. As a result of bills passed in Washington in the years before and after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the local school board now operates programs on behalf of the handicapped, the bilingual child, women's and civil rights. It provides school lunches, pays for safety programs, and guards the privacy of student records. There are at least half a hundred other programs and activities of local districts that have their origin in federal enactments.

But it is the judiciary which has become the great policy maker for public education, forcing the local board to wait, and see, and execute what the courts order. The historic 1954 U.S. Supreme Court

decision on desegregation has required abandonment of racial segregation in the schools, much of which resulted from local board decisions—or indecision. The High Court has also spoken out on whether school children may pray in public schools, whether they must salute the flag, under what conditions a principal may suspend or expel a student, and when a school board may ask a pregnant teacher to leave her job.

Lower federal and state courts have decreed policy on student dress, punishment of students, busing, use of controversial textbooks, club activities, and the conditions under which boards may or may not fire the superintendent. Month after month, countless court decisions lay down, amend, or erase school board policy on curriculum, students, teachers, finance, physical plant, and administration.

In 1967 federal Judge J. Skelly Wright, in the *Hobson v. Hansen* case, showed the extent to which school policy can become the province of the courts. Wright's opinion invalidated Washington, D.C., school policies on pupil attendance zones, ability grouping (the track system), and standardized testing. "The track system must be abolished," said the judge, upsetting local school philosophy and board policy. As if to justify the court's action in taking over the powers of the board, Wright wrote: "The judiciary must bear a hand and accept its responsibility to assist in the solution [of problems] where constitutional rights hang in the balance. . . ."

On top of federal legislative, executive, and judicial actions, the state adds its own laws and regulations for the local school board. Very little escapes the attention of the state: how many whacks to give a child when corporal punishment is required, who shall ride and who shall walk to school, and, in many instances, which books a teacher must use to teach reading or social studies.

Teacher power, parent power, and student power limit, guide, and in some cases override the authority of the school board. Negotiated collective agreements produce personnel policies and not infrequently policies on class size, extracurricular activities, grading, and homework. Many a board gives up its position on course offerings and textbooks when parents pressure for change, and students have forced changes in regulations on smoking, hair length, and dress.

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ED137108

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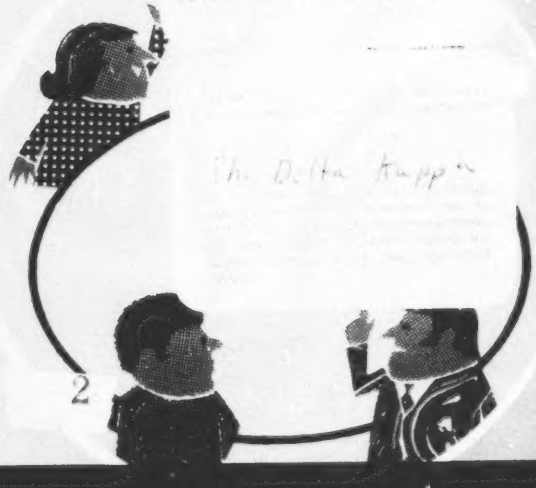

Less visible, but real, are the forces that determine what shall be taught and what shall be omitted from the curriculum, and how the board shall allocate the resources available for education. Regional accrediting associations, authors and publishers of textbooks, the powerful standardized testing agencies, and, at another level, even the organized athletic coaches of a region all do their work in setting policy and program for a school district—often without the school board even being aware of the results.

We now come to the question, Who has the actual authority to run the schools, the board or the superintendent? Out of the interminable debates these hard facts emerge: Weak boards frequently relinquish their authority to strong superintendents or, being weak, are largely stripped of their powers and responsibilities; but even strong boards must share their powers with superintendents. In many instances, the state gives the superintendent wide statutory authority to act on behalf of the district's program of education as the executive secretary of the board, and the energetic and ambitious superintendent grasps such opportunities to become policy maker, policy executor, and policy evaluator. The weak board is left dangling. Only a strong board can take advantage of its potential for contributions to the cause of better community education.

In short, the state delegates broad powers to the board of education to operate the public schools, then erodes these powers with laws and regulations. But then the state's power itself is worn away by actions of the federal government. The growing powers of teacher organizations, of pressure and lobbying groups, as well as the doctrines of professional and learned organizations, reduce the range of the board's choices as chief school authority. Like quicksilver, the locus of educational power is here, there, and everywhere.

"School board decisions are no longer accepted as the last word on educational policies," says William R. Hazard of Northwestern University, former superintendent of Kansas City schools. He adds that board decisions are more and more viewed as the first word in confrontations, and the adversaries may include the superintendent, teachers, parents, taxpayers, and the state or federal government.

When school board members get together at national and state conventions, they hear a good deal about the "forces which whittle away at local control of schools by lay people." They then pass

resolutions asserting the power and sanctity of the local board. Through organized lobbying they seek to make their collective voices heard in Washington and in state capitals—and frequently have an impact on legislation. The National School Boards Association recently moved its offices from Evanston, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., to be closer to "that master school board," the Congress, and to influence its educational measures affecting elementary and secondary public education. State school board associations and many boards in large cities are also learning the art of influencing lawmakers.

Possibly stronger lobbying and more militant affirmation of local control would help raise the status and influence of boards of education. Meanwhile, despite severe limitations, boards are still left with reservoirs of power—legal, educational, moral. How they attempt to use this power is indicated in the next chapters.

Managers and Directors

When the beginning board member comes to his first school board meeting, his mind teeming with ideas for educational progress, he may find that he must spend a good deal of his time approving bills, choosing the lowest bidder for the purchase of fuel oil, and debating how to get a gym roof repaired at lowest cost.

This should not disappoint the idealistic board member, just as it should not lead the business-minded board member to conclude that business matters are the chief concern of the board. Both should accept the fact that their board is charged by the state to operate the schools, and this requires attention to a long list of managerial functions.

As the state's legal agent, the board is the only entity in the community which can make contracts on behalf of the district's educational needs, employ staff, purchase real estate and other property, accept federal and state funds, and levy taxes (where authorized by state law).

A board of education is the board of directors of a large human and business enterprise, entrusted by law with capital assets and operating funds running into the millions, and responsible for managing staffs of professionals and nonprofessionals sometimes totaling in the thousands.

Whether to pave a driveway, clear the snow, install a printing shop, get the best buy in fuel oil, hire or fire a janitor, safeguard students' scholastic records, plan a five-million-dollar school building—they're all part of a board's function.

A more formal index of the board's business responsibilities would include these, among others:

Bond campaigns	Plant construction
Budget preparation	Plant renovation
Buildings and grounds maintenance	Purchasing
Fiscal accounting	Recruitment
Food services	Retirement plans
Insurance management	Safety programs
Negotiations	Surplus property disposal
Payroll procedures	Tax and debt management
Personnel management	Transportation services

Behind this sampling are hundreds of detailed managerial duties.

To oversee and direct the people who carry out these duties, the board is required to hire a chief executive, the superintendent, and delegate to him day-to-day operating responsibility. Legal and professional sources give copious advice on the meaning of "delegation of responsibility."

"One of the great responsibilities of a board of education, perhaps the greatest," says *Boardsmanship*, a handbook for school board members published by the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio School Boards Association, "is the selection and employment of a competent superintendent." A similar handbook from Michigan adds that board and superintendent must work harmoniously, and a Washington state handbook stresses that it is the board's duty to help the superintendent work effectively and to create for him the proper working atmosphere.

We now come to the hard reality of board/superintendent relationships. What is the actual job of the superintendent and what is the actual job of the board? The textbook says it is the board's function to make policies and the superintendent's to carry out the policies. It is commonly put this way: "The function of the board is not to run the schools but to see that they are run effectively."

Such answers suggest that the school board is, in effect, a legislative body enacting "laws" and that the superintendent must carry them out. The analogy, true to some extent, implies further that the board can evaluate how effectively its "laws" are carried out and, if dissatisfied, can either change the laws or the superintendent.

Such a pattern runs true for many school districts. It is one of the characteristics of effective boardmanship. But it covers only partially the real working relationships between board and superintendent.

The superintendent who reports to his desk in the morning is engulfed in details of administration. Every few minutes may bring a different problem, task, or chore. Some are disposed of promptly—

signing reports and application forms for the state department of education or authorizing the attendance officer to investigate persistent absenteeism of a student. Others require scheduling conferences with municipal officials on fiscal issues or with teacher representatives on salary schedules. And many a problem requires the superintendent to roll up his sleeves and plunge into a mass of details—sketching the outlines for next year's budget, for example.

In all these tasks the superintendent acts as the agent of the board, which, in turn, is empowered to act as the agent of the state. But the superintendent is a professional, presumably a responsible, creative adult with experience and expertise. He has a job to do. In doing it, he knows that he must follow federal and state regulations. He also knows that he should follow board policy, if specific policy exists to guide a specific assignment. An executive acts under pressure of events, and in doing so he may sometimes ignore, amend, or bend board policy. Or, he may make and execute policy on the spot and ask for the board's approval later.

Good boardmanship does not accept such actions or such attitudes. Good boardmanship holds true to the principle that the board must always be in charge and must get what it wants when it wants it.

Consider, for example, the board's responsibility for budgeting as part of its fiscal management function. Too complex and detailed for a board to develop, the school budget is prepared by the superintendent with the help of many people. When completed, the board must adopt it and oversee its implementation.

But how can the board control the budget-making process? How can it have its final say? How can the board see to it that its wishes and expectations are made real? For example:

In budgeting, the board may wish to cooperate with municipal authorities to keep the tax rate at a reasonable level; to guarantee fundamental and basic course offerings, eliminating courses which have been found of peripheral value; and to reduce its outlay for hardware while increasing the resources for educational services.

Sensitive to public opinion, the board may wish to allot more funds for nonathletic extracurricular activities, for summer sessions, or for intensified instruction in reading in all grades. It may wish to reduce reliance on gate receipts and on admission fees to school events.

The board may desire greater involvement of classroom teachers in decision making, increased citizen participation, a definite number of public information sessions on school money matters each year—and finally, a budgetary document which every citizen can understand, if not agree with.

The board can get what it wants only if it sets down its ideas in written policy statements. Scores of policies may have to be developed or updated to guide the administration in making the budget. Individual policy statements may fall into a variety of categories: fiscal, public relations, staff communications, citizens advisory committees, participation of laypersons at board meetings. But once they are developed, the superintendent is obligated to respect them, follow them, and to report to the board how they are working out.

The board can be a responsible agent of the state in operating the community's schools only if it sees to it that the superintendent is a responsible agent of the board. And as we shall see in subsequent sections, written policy is necessary in achieving this goal.

For Learners and Teachers

A board of education in a small New England town had been trying for months to find time at its regular meetings to develop a philosophy of education. Finally, the board agreed to hold a special meeting for this purpose. On the designated night, only four of the nine members showed up. They waited and waited, then decided to cancel the discussion. When an hour later two other members arrived, the board plunged into a debate concerning the school septic system.

That a large percentage of America's school boards are unwilling or unable to take up serious educational issues as part of their work is no secret. "What do I know about education?" is a common board member observation. "That's why we hire the educators. It's their job to do the educational thing."

Only in the vaguest constitutional and legal languages are school boards charged with responsibility for educational leadership. State statutes or regulations may call upon the local board to "provide a program of quality education," or to "establish and maintain programs of instruction to meet the needs of all the children and youth in the district." Such mandates can be carried out by the administration without the board's participation—and some boards are willing to leave it at that. They do not hesitate to approve, often in a perfunctory manner, the educational goals, policies, and programs drafted for them by the administration. In a follow-up to the story about the New England school board (philosophy versus septic system), the press reported that the board approved unanimously and without discussion a statement of "Goals and Philosophy" prepared by the superintendent and opening with the declaration, "Human growth is modifiable."

Whether they can put them on paper or not, boards do have goals, aspirations, and expectations—a body of thought and principles that make up their philosophy. These become evident, willy-nilly, in scores of actions during board meetings. When a board permits student smoking on school grounds, does it not express its philosophy about health education and about the role of the school in developing habits and character in youth? When a board reduces the counseling and guidance staff without similar cuts in the athletic and coaching staff, does it not express its philosophy about the basic needs of students?

Good boardmanship requires that the members place their convictions and ideas on the line for the administration, the teachers, the students, the community. These ideas may be developed with the help of many, and can be altered when alteration is required. But since they will affect what happens in the classroom, in the principal's office, in the home and community, and in the lives of the students, these ideas ought to be thrashed out, stated, written down, and adopted by formal board action.

A board reveals both its ideas and its willingness to exert educational leadership by its overt concern for specific educational issues. Aside from fighting educational fires (to have or not have sex education; to allow or not to allow a certain library book), is the board working consistently on the substance and process of teaching and learning?

Every district has its immediate and pressing educational problems, which are either "handled" by the superintendent or "solved" by short-range board decisions. But where educational leadership is a part of serious board responsibility, the board is continually concerned with such topics as:

Instructional goals: Is the school system meeting its basic responsibility for equipping children with basic skills?

Curriculum development. Are course offerings in the district under review, evaluation, reconstruction, and enrichment?

Career education: Is the district even-handed in providing for the needs of the college-bound, the job-bound, the female students, the gifted?

Academic freedom. What kind of atmosphere and working conditions is the board willing to create for effective teaching and learning?

Guidance and counseling: Considerations may be given to questions about guidance and counseling—for whom, how much, by whom, at what cost, with what benefits?

Individualized study: Is the district prepared to sponsor programs which give the student greater responsibility for his own learning?

School libraries: Are the collections in the elementary and secondary schools adequate for student needs?

Tests and examinations: Should they be tough and frequent? Should they be primarily instructional (rather than grading) devices?

Homework: How can the board balance the views of teachers, parents, students, and community on this topic?

Class size: What is the board's response to claims about the benefits or disadvantages of varying class sizes?

To these selected topics let's add a dozen or so more which should be on board agendas more frequently than they are: Textbook selection. Minicourses. Advanced placement. Field trips. Use of community resources. Education in the arts. Summer sessions. Adult education. Grading and reporting. Grouping for instruction. Extracurricular activities. Controversial courses, instructional materials, and speakers. Inservice education for the teaching staff.

We bring out these topics because they should be of first concern to the board, and to show how much there is for a board to do if it wishes to assume leadership for educational programs. These topics are but a sampling. The index of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association shows more than 100 entries under the category *instruction*, many deserving a board policy statement.

How is a group of busy laypersons to exert influence and direction on questions which have baffled educators, philosophers, researchers, and administrators? Can a board really help shape the many and complex educational programs and procedures?

The least that can be said is that the board must try. Behind this assertion is the belief that, yes, laypersons can exert influence, and members of a board of education are *obligated* to do so.

Out of the experiences of effective boards in all parts of the country have evolved these techniques to help boards assert their responsibility on educational topics:

1. Ask questions. There is power in questions. The kind beginning on page 21 should stimulate action by the board and administration.

2. Request reports. The board should request the administration to present periodic reports on what's going on in the classrooms, in the curriculum office, in the testing and research office. Reports can be made by the superintendent, principals, supervisors, program specialists, and best of all, by teachers. Some reports can be reserved for the private reading of board members, but most should be presented in open meeting, with the public invited to listen and take part in subsequent question-and-answer sessions or discussions.

3. Initiate an audit of your district's educational and instructional policies. How many are there? How many should there be? Are they recent? Outdated? Which should get first attention because they are most urgently needed? Such an undertaking could take months. (See the chapter on policy development and use.) It will refurbish one part of your district's policy manual, and it will immerse the board in educational issues and enhance its leadership for the community's education.

4. Make budgetary decisions which help develop educational programs. Decisions which increase support for teachers, instructional materials, wider variety of course offerings, and student services place the board on record as having concern for the educational needs of children and youth.

5. See to it that teaching and learning are the principal ingredients in the district's public information programs. Public forums, reports to the news media, and bulletins to parents should deal for the most part with curriculum, instruction, outcomes of teaching—in short, the child and his schooling.

6. Finally, don't leave the educational arena entirely to the expert and specialist, even though he may claim access to "the literature" and to "the findings of research." The wise board member listens to the experts and seeks their advice, but he evaluates and balances this with the wisdom of the layperson. Common sense is needed for sound educational policies. The board member should never underestimate the power of the layperson's views. When these views reflect those of the community, when they are pooled and refined around the board table, they become essential parts of educational policy.

Spokespersons and Interpreters

"The people of your school district regard you as *the* board of education 24 hours a day," says a briefing pamphlet for newly elected board members distributed by the California School Boards Association. "Your telephone will resound with their educational hopes and frustrations."

Board members' phones also resound with the hopes and frustrations of the professional educator.

We come here to a third cluster of boardmanship functions: to make the public presence felt in the educational establishment and, in turn, to make the educational presence felt in the community. The board of education must see, on the one hand, that public needs and wishes are respected and protected in the educational bureaucracy and, on the other, that education and its integrity are protected among the people.

The zealot in the classroom or in administration can be as damaging to children as the zealot in the community. Educators must not be allowed to take over, or take *in*, the public; and activist parents and taxpayers must not be allowed to take over, or take *in*, education.

The board of education is strategically placed to bring about interaction between the educational establishment and the community for the ultimate benefit of children and youth.

The process of refereeing and attending to the needs of educators and the public is not well understood by America's school boards. The job is seldom desired or accepted, nor is it generally well executed when it is attempted.

Donald R. Gallagher of Glassboro (New Jersey) State College reminds us that "there was a time in education when a school district

made few attempts to communicate with its community. The philosophy was, 'Don't tell them anything, because they don't understand education; and what's more, they're not interested.' "

More citizens now want to know about their schools, and more boards are willing to tell them. But a large percentage of America's school boards still prefer to remain silent. They do so either because they don't like "publicity," don't have the resources, don't have the skills, or don't see the need for a public relations or public information program. When the schools are in trouble, or when a bond issue is to be sold, officials do run to the press or begin to turn out "informational leaflets" on the district's educational achievements. Sporadic, disjointed forays rather than continuing and coordinated efforts are characteristic of our country's school public relations.

Selling the Schools to the Public

Less than a hundred school districts employ full-time public relations experts. The remaining districts use whatever personnel or resources can be put to the task; often the superintendent himself, a principal, or even a teacher performs the public relations function.

The sophisticated school public relations practitioner does his work under any one of a series of labels, such as director of community relations, educational communications, school/community coordination, or public information. The part-time worker is likely to see his goal more simply as "selling the schools to the people." There is a respectable literature on this subject; techniques, strategies, approaches, and media are constantly being refined and developed.

News releases, feature stories, photographs of school children, newsletters, and promotional pamphlets and leaflets are among the staples of school public relations activity. The more ambitious district finds ways to use radio, television, and speakers' bureaus to tell the school's story. The theme of these media is usually, "See how good we are. . . ." Rarely do such public relations ventures succeed in explaining, interpreting, and building understanding of the educational process or the resources needed to get adequate—let alone "quality"—education. And this despite years of effort. For more than 25 years, the National School Public Relations Association

(now in Arlington, Virginia) has labored in this field, seeking to upgrade the services of the full-time public relations specialist and guiding the part-time or auxiliary worker.

Results have been uneven at best. In some communities the people understand and value what the schools are doing and feel the presence and worth of their schools and the people who run them. But more frequently there is alienation between the schools and the public; there are confidence crises, gaps in understandings, and public relations failures.

George Gallup, the public opinion expert, sheds light on this subject. His annual surveys of public attitudes toward public schools (published by Phi Delta Kappa) reveal large stretches of ignorance among the people about their schools. Substantial percentages of the people, the Gallup organization concludes, have little information or inaccurate information about their school boards, their administrators, and what the schools are doing or achieving.

On the assumption that public relations failures can be cured by more public relations, Gallup made the following statement to an audience of board members at the 1974 convention of the National School Boards Association:

> My first suggestion is that you establish friendly relations with the press. The more understanding that reporters and editors have of your problems, the more likely they are to give their readers or viewers the same understanding.
>
> The press, however, is not the best vehicle for telling the public just what the functions and responsibilities of school boards are. This task you will have to do yourself. And one suggestion for accomplishing this is to make certain that every household in your school district at least once a year receives a letter which spells out in detail these functions.
>
> The same letter can perform a dual function: Tell citizens what your responsibilities are and at the same time and in the same letter elicit their views. This will provide some evidence that you are actually trying to represent all of the people and not a clique, as is sometimes charged. . . .
>
> If each month one-ninth of all households receives a letter of the kind I have suggested, then for each of the nine school months you will be receiving suggestions, praise, and criticism that can be summarized for press releases.
>
> And now one more suggestion. I would assign one person on the school staff to collect each month examples and evidence of achievement in the classroom. The public is interested, in fact hungry, for

news that reports the good things that are happening in our schools. . . . If each week there is a success story in the press, this will go a long way toward offsetting the news that reflects adversely on the school system.

Selling the Public to Education

The people have something of value to contribute to educational goals and practices. The educationist may not believe this. Hence he will resist or even ridicule the people's ideas and wishes—until the fires break out, the protests roar, the explosions come, the confrontations in which the educators are usually the losers reach violent proportions.

The fact that the people "own" the schools is not the sole reason for making certain that the public presence is felt in the educational establishment. As in any establishment, educators become victims of the cancer of bureaucracy. They want to spend more and more money for programs only they can justify. They claim access to secret wisdom. They adopt we-know-more-than-you attitudes. They use a lingo that baffles and frustrates the parent and the citizen—and often misleads them, willfully or not. They develop programs, activities, and course offerings which common sense from common people would reject on sober review. Dick and Jane would have shorter lives, the excesses of either phonics or look-see methods would have been curtailed, and any aberrations of so-called progressive or traditional education would have been controlled if the wisdom of laypersons had penetrated more deeply into the educational establishment.

This is work for the board of education, and, again, it is a task not well understood, desired, or accepted by the community. Effective boards, however, succeed in bringing about interaction between the specialist's ideas and the ideas of the community, tempering the ambitions of educators without squelching their enthusiasm or underutilizing their expertise.

The board can do this by keeping in constant communication with members of the administration and the faculty. Internal newsletters are useful. The board can use other media as well to tell the staff what people want, think, and need. Local public opinion polls and the deliberations of citizens advisory committees are useful in this task. When drastic measures are needed to enforce the point of

view of the layperson, the board can use its powers to fire, control expenses, or lop off undesirable activities through its budgetary process.

More happily, the board can make the public presence felt in the educational establishment through creative processes: 1) its policy-making function and 2) its management of the board of education meeting.

These two responsibilities are so important, so pervasive, so basic to everything the board of education does, that we now take them up in separate chapters.

Policy Development and Use

Tell the typical school board member that the most important task on the board of education is to formulate policy and he is likely to become baffled, puzzled, even impatient. Policy is for lawmakers, statesmen, and big corporation directors, is it not? The board member, being a middle American—an employee, homemaker, small businessman, or professional—has been too busy doing things to worry about policy formulation. Throughout most of his career he has carried out policy made by others. Yet, when he joins a school board he is expected to become a policy maker, to entrust the execution of that policy to the school administration, and to evaluate the effectiveness of his handiwork. Policy making is what school board membership is all about, he is told, and the frustration grows. It is a task more or less foreign to the experience of most Americans. That is why many board members are only too glad to adopt and approve policy placed before them—ready-made—by the administration. That is why many board members do not grasp the distinction between broad policy and narrow regulation. Some would as soon spend time arguing a "policy" on safeguarding the school's petty cash box as on developing policy for inservice education for teachers.

Yet effective boardmanship calls for board members who are, or can become, skilled policy makers, enforcers, and evaluators. For policy can be the board's best friend, and the administration's, too. Policy, when expressed clearly in writing, sets forth a board's ideas, beliefs, and convictions. It then permits the administration to take follow-up actions. Policy is power. Those who make policy are in control. Only the board which takes its policy-development role seriously will be able to exert its influence and exercise its authority. Furthermore, soundly constructed policy liberates the board from

details of execution, placing these details on the shoulders of the administration where they should be. At the same time, policy communicates to the administration what the board wants to achieve, leaving the administrators free to use their discretion in putting policy into effect.

Governing a local school district, big or small, with its manifold programs, requires a wide range of policies. They are needed for instruction; personnel (teaching and nonteaching); student relations; general administration, including relations between board and superintendent; fiscal and business management; development of physical plant and facilities; and community relations. Also needed are policies and procedures for organizing and operating the board itself, its committees, and its meetings. The originators of the Davies-Brickel system of policy making and codification (now based in Tucson, Arizona) believe that a category of policies is also needed for new construction. The Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association has included sections on negotiations and intergovernmental agency relations, reflecting current preoccupation with collective bargaining and contacts with local, state, and federal agencies on problems ranging from police protection to mental health and child abuse.

The actual number of items that boards include in their policy manuals may go over one thousand. In such collections, some policies deal with minute matters of administration—e.g., who shall have possession of keys to school buildings—and are really regulations which can best be left to assistant superintendents or principals to work out. Other policies are negative, restrictive, or prohibitive—to protect the board, the schools, and the programs from damage or harm. Still other policies are procedural—spelling out ways and steps to get things done, to make them happen or prevent them from happening.

Procedural policies are necessary for orderly business and once agreed upon can save time and effort in running a school system. Restrictive policies are also needed. But as students of boardmanship point out, too much time of too many school boards is spent on the trivial, the negative, the minutely procedural. Good boardmanship calls for concentration first on policies which deal with educational goals and ideas and with people (students, teachers, administration, parents, community groups) and next with the things and re-

sources needed to provide the people with educational services.

The sophisticated board member recognizes that some policies are in the basement of our structure of educational needs. Such policies (if indeed they are policies rather than administrative rules) can be given short shrift by the school board. It can, in good conscience, quickly approve drafts presented by the superintendent or borrow exemplars from neighboring systems and adopt them with minor changes as necessary.

But policies which are near the top of our values and beliefs—those dealing with educational goals, ideas, and programs and which will deeply affect students, staff, and the community—will have worth and power only if the board cultivates and nurtures them and builds into them the concepts of the community, the staff, and its own members. Such policies can give the board the means for exercising educational leadership, for making the presence of education felt in the community, and the presence of the community felt among teachers, supervisors, and administrators.

We have already noted that federal law, federal guidelines, the courts, and the state government are an unending source of policy for the local district. Even when they are thrust upon the community, such policies do not relieve the board of its responsibility to master and manage them. The most detailed of these "inherited" policies still leave room for local interpretation and adaptation. And there is always the option for the board to go to court to fight imposed policies which are at sharp variance with the community's mores. A board's responsibility for policy affecting the district's people cannot be shifted or avoided.

Community, parental, and student needs provide as much challenge for educational policy as do national and state issues. The effective board uses formal and informal ways to spot and sift topics requiring policy decisions. The eyes and ears of board members must be counted among the means of problem identification. Reports from the superintendent, the faculty, citizen advisory groups, editorials in the press, the voices of citizens attending board meetings provide a constant flow of clues regarding problems that require policy coverage. The effective board works on the right policy at the right time. This means it initiates policy on significant educational problems—and does so before crises develop and before fires flare.

The actual process of policy formulation may be short if the prob-

lem is simple and uncomplicated. But policies concerned with educational goals and ideas—policies which will affect large numbers of people—may take months, sometimes years. In fact, the work may never end. For, as a major policy is developed, adopted, applied, and evaluated, it will require revision and reconstruction within a short time.

The policy-making process begins with an idea, a need, a problem, a challenge. A board member's questions are often the beginnings of policy. Policy sometimes begins when dissatisfied parents demand from the board new or revised educational services for their children. Policy is started when administration and staff desire changes, express concerns, present grievances. And policy is initiated when the board looks ahead, plans for future services, or anticipates problems, issues, and needs likely to be of concern to the community.

A board does not sit down with pads of blank paper to start drafting policy statements. It turns first to the superintendent with instructions to initiate the policy-development process. In turn, the superintendent and his staff begin gathering material from law, judicial opinions, research findings, professional literature, or the experiences of school districts in and out of state. The administration may also search contracts negotiated and signed by the board and the minutes of board meetings over the past several years. Finally, the administration has the option of getting sample policies, to be used as background material, from state or national associations of school boards.

The contributions of faculty, of specialists, and of students may be of value on some issues, and these are obtained through committee studies, questionnaire surveys, and interviews. The opinions and reactions of parents and taxpayers and of community groups are received at board meetings at the times a proposed policy is under consideration. Complex issues—grading and reporting, homework, grouping, teaching about religion—require public hearings which have been given wide advance publicity. At such hearings the views of the layperson are examined alongside the views of the specialist and the educator. And the board must listen to both and weigh the merits of each.

At all times the board must be aware of its own responsibility in the policy-development process. The late, late hours of a regular

board meeting are no time for studying policy elements and choosing policy alternatives. Policy study deserves adequate board time—time cleared of business items and routine transactions. Policy work sessions can be scheduled at regular meetings, but they are best conducted at special agreed-upon times. The format of work sessions may call for involvement of educators and parents, but it is at such sessions, if ever, that the board must contribute its opinion, its wishes, its wisdom.

"One of the most overlooked and sadly neglected resources in policy development," says a letter from a board member to the author of this publication, "is we ourselves, the board members. Our experience and our judgment are underutilized, often completely neglected. It's our fault. We defer to the experts. We say: 'What do we know about curriculum, textbooks, class size?' So we go along, often unquestioningly, with the educators and specialists. Well, my argument is that we should listen to the experts—up to a point. But there is also the point when we, as board members, must feed our knowledge, our common sense, and the sense of the people, into the making of policies."

How policies are checked and rechecked, edited and revised, and placed on the board agenda for official approval, disapproval, or referral back for further revision is up to a board's internal procedure. But adoption does not end the process of putting policies to work. At least three additional steps are necessary:

Inform, publicize, disseminate. The people who will be most immediately affected should be immediately informed of the birth of the new policy or new policy clauses. Internal and external media should be used to interpret and explain the board's expectations or the new principles the board has adopted. Official texts of policies should be placed in loose-leaf policy manuals kept in the central office and in each school building. The public media should get digests, summaries, or abstracts of new and revised policies.

Implement, enforce, police. Newly enacted policies are sometimes forgotten, bypassed, ignored, or left inoperative. One way to get policies into action is to require that the superintendent immediately draft the regulations needed to put policies to work. (In ideal instances, the detailed regulations are submitted to the board at the time set for final approval of the policy.) When appropriate, the board may also call for time schedules for implementing the board's

wishes. And the board must periodically ask: Is the administration applying the policy? Is it being administered even-handedly, fairly, and without compromising other principles laid down by the board?

Evaluate, revise, and start over again—if necessary. The board must also ask: Is the policy working? Is it helping? Is it contributing toward the solution of administrative problems or toward better education? If not, can it be, should it be, revised? Or does it need to be scrapped and work started anew on a different set of ideas?

"School board policy development is a process, not a project," says William E. Dickinson, originator of the National School Boards Association's policy classification system. "It is a continuum of actions, operations, and decisions that never ends. . . ."

Under such conditions, policy statement will soon pile up upon policy statement. The accumulation is manageable only with a scheme under which policies are classified, codified, and placed in a loose-leaf manual to permit easy location and substitution of new and revised policy statements for outdated ones.

Boards across the country devote considerable time to the creation of such policy manuals, because, says Superintendent Edgar B. Redman, Kendallville, Indiana, "they are beginning to realize that maintaining a codified policy manual is now the first step in modern school board operations."

Developing a school board policy manual may require expert help, such as provided by the NSBA's Educational Policies Service (Waterford, Connecticut), by the Davies-Brickel system (Tucson, Arizona), and by other smaller, independent consulting agencies. Specialists for such projects say that it may take from three to nine months to assemble, edit, and codify a board's policy decisions. A time-consuming task in such an undertaking is to locate the board's implicit and implied policy decisions. These may be part of minutes going back several years. They may be scattered in negotiated contracts with teachers, faculty handbooks, releases issued to the press, and in the rules and regulations issued by the administration. "Cleaning the attic" and "setting the house in order"—phrases used by those given the task of creating a policy manual—suggest the nature of the work. "It may be tedious work," says Rodney L. Bartels, of the Council Bluffs, Iowa, school system, "but it pays off in efficient school board operation."

The School Board Meeting

What an extraordinary institution—the official meeting of the board of education! When members of the board sit down at the table for a scheduled meeting, each individual assumes legal power and the board takes on the aspects of a legal body. Under established law and under new freedom of information legislation, the meeting must be open to the public. Working in a fishbowl, the board does all its business, from okaying a repairman's bill to adopting a multi-million-dollar budget, from debating and approving educational policy to laying the base for new school programs.

From the conduct of the meeting, and its results, the press and the citizens gain their impressions of the board's effectiveness. The public image of the board is established not by what the school publicity news release says but by what the board meeting does and how it does it. At the board meeting the press and the people scrutinize both the process and the product. For them, the meeting is the medium and the message. The board's reputation as business manager, as educational leader, and as a force in the community are on the line during the few hours the board is in session. At stake also are the public's opportunity to know about, and subsequently their support of, the schools.

In the past this extraordinary role and impact of the board meeting was neither well understood nor appreciated. Traditionally, the American school board held one meeting a month devoted to routine business. On educational matters it deferred entirely to the superintendent. If irate parents came to "tell the board off," the grievances were usually referred to the administration "for handling."

Over the years, the board meeting gained the reputation as either

the "dullest show in town" or as the scene of long, bitter (often personal) arguments about matters which had little to do with good schooling for children. Boards often sat long past midnight, accomplishing little. A frequently used description of the intolerable meeting is one at which the "chairperson loses the gavel, then his watch, then the agenda, and finally the entire board loses its reason for being around the table."

A wasteful board meeting results from poor planning and inadequate preparation; from the failure of the superintendent or chairperson to identify items which must be on the agenda and those which might be left off; and from attempts to squeeze into one meeting routine transactions and matters of vital policy and educational concern. Such mixing becomes muddling.

Effective school boards today use the agenda as a dynamic instrument for creating an efficient and productive meeting. To make it so, the agenda is planned by the superintendent and the board chairperson. Both recognize that the agenda can be stacked and often is—by administrators who would rather see the board tangle with trivial matters and leave education to the experts, or by a chairperson who overloads it with business transactions of personal interest to himself.

An exemplary agenda requires routine matters to be taken care of briskly, a process that is expedited when the superintendent prepares the texts of routine motions to be approved. The effective agenda is free of clutter; the items included are of urgent or underlying importance. Time is provided for listening to opinions of the public; adequate provision is made for getting new facts from faculty and staff; and opportunity is provided to hear what members would like to have on the agenda for the next meeting.

Copies of the agenda, together with support documents (if any are needed), are sent to all members three or four days before the meeting. "There should be no surprises for either board members or the administration when the meeting is called to order," says Frank Jamison, a school board chairperson from Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Nor should there be wrangling over detail or minutiae of procedure. When debate becomes tiresome and meaningless, it can be cut short with the question, "Do we have a policy on this?" If yes, let the superintendent apply it; if not, let the process begin of developing one in the very near future.

Efficiency at board of education business meetings, where significant, not trivial, matters are discussed and settled expeditiously, enhances the public image of the board. It will not take long for word to go forth that the board knows what it's doing and does it well. Public confidence in education is one of the results.

The regularly scheduled, once-a-month meeting can rarely accommodate the thinking, the exploration, the debates and discussion needed for policy development and for calm consideration of educational problems. That is why more and more boards are setting up a second and even a third regular monthly meeting, and why it is necessary from time to time to set up additional special meetings.

Extra meetings fall into two categories:

Workshop sessions. This is a time when board members become learners. The successful workshop session usually tackles one major topic, for example, community fiscal problems in preparation for the budget or a review of the arguments for and against citizens advisory committees. For successful workshop sessions the superintendent prepares ample copies of background documents and invites resource people to brief board members. Ideas keep flowing; board members, staff, and citizens exchange views; but no motions are made, no resolutions offered, no decisions reached. These are reserved for another time.

The public forum. A suggestion that one regular board meeting each month be used as a public forum, or, more precisely, as a "public court of educational relations," was made at the 1970 convention of the American Association of School Administrators. The suggestion has been tested in a number of communities and, with countless variations, has been put into effect. The rationale and the substance for this type of meeting were described as follows:

> Most of our actions around the board table are defensive, restrictive, argumentative, punitive, trivial, or controlling of some minor administrative item. Many of our actions, by force of circumstance, separate and alienate us from our teachers, fail to bring parents and taxpayers closer to the schools, and do little to help us understand the student or to help students understand their community and their environment and prepare for the future.
>
> In view of the severely restricted role I'm allowed and my board is allowed, and to counteract the functions which are, in effect, negative, what could we do that would be positive, constructive, energizing, liberating? As I walk home after each meeting, I ask: Why couldn't we have done something to inspire, inform, illuminate? And often I

wonder why our board, in addition to doing its necessary chores, couldn't also serve as a public court of educational relations one evening a month. But what a difference holding court on such evenings would make on the educational scene of the community!

In such a public court of educational relations, the feeling would not be one of the employer versus employees, of taxpayers versus public spenders, of rule makers versus those who have to obey the rules. Its mood and temper would be one of explaining, proposing, questioning, groping, exploring, and sympathetic listening.

To such a public court, teachers would come not as hired hands but as educators, giving their views, asking questions, letting their hair down, and shaking their dreams loose.

To such a public court, parents, taxpayers, and students would come at first, perhaps, with shouts and demands—and later with their opinions, their questions, their needs, and possibly, too, with reasoned proposals and imaginative suggestions.

In some school districts the meeting of the board of education is a cut-and-dried affair, a time and place for doing sums, paying bills, and voting motions up and down with little distinction made between motions that affect the educational future of a generation and those that spell out ways to do business with vendors. The agendas for such meetings are hoary; their pattern hasn't changed in years.

Where boardmanship is a serious matter, the meeting room is a stage on which are mounted discussions of community needs, goals, curricula, textbooks, teaching methods. Each month, scores of individuals make their entrances and their exits: staff experts, administrators, teachers, parents, taxpayers, students, representatives of the powerful and the poor. They come bringing their problems, complaints, and suggestions. And through the medium of the legal meeting, the board creates time to listen, react and interact, to study and explore—and to make decisions.

This book and others in the series are made available at low cost through the contributions of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, established in 1966 with a bequest by George H. Reavis. The foundation exists to promote a better understanding of the nature of the educative process and the relation of education to human welfare. It operates by subsidizing authors to write booklets and monographs in nontechnical language so that beginning teachers and the public generally may gain a better understanding of educational problems.

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